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THE HUMOR OF "ROAST PIG"

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A choice of essays by Charles Lamb suitable for high-school reading will invariably include "A Dissertation upon Roast Pig." It is undoubtedly selected because of its humor; and yet it is too many times read and reported upon solely for the narrative part of it. "Read 'Roast Pig' for tomorrow" is frequently the only assignment made. The pupils come to class with a knowledge of the story of Bo-bo and Hoti, the details of which they are able to recite as so much veritable history. Very few, if any, of the class understand what Lamb is trying to say in the latter part of the essay. They are puzzled over the Latin phrases and the long words. Not more than one or two in the class are able to see anything funny in the entire essay! How much appreciation of Charles Lamb has been taught by such a method?

The atmosphere of "Roast Pig" is solely the atmosphere of humor. If you can teach the humor of it, you have taught it well. Your success in teaching it is in proportion to the amount of laughter you can create during the recitation period in connection with it. Do not detract from the good time you and your class are having by any other consideration. Let this one essay, if no other, be enjoyed so much that a portion of your pupils will endeavor to imitate it.

The assignment might well consist of a number of questions that will suggest the humor. The following I have found to be efficacious:

1. Tell the story of the origin of the art of roasting.
2. Find an example of anachronism in the narrative. Why did Lamb use it?
3. Translate the Latin phrases. Why did not Lamb use English equivalents?
4. Why did Lamb use such expressions as *adhesive oleaginous*, *cream and quintessence*, *animal manna*, *ambrosian result*?

5. Why should the pig himself be grateful for being killed so young?
6. What has the incident of the plum cake to do with the rest of the essay?

When the class meets for the period, the teacher may well ignore these questions, and with a few remarks or questions based upon the story of Bo-bo, pass immediately to the paragraph beginning, "Without placing too implicit faith in the account above given." If this part of the essay be read with the intonation and emphasis that its humor demands, within three paragraphs most of the class ought to be smiling. And in the middle of the paragraph beginning, "There is no flavor comparable," the whole class should be enjoying itself. And with the paragraph about his weeping out his eyes, there ought to be some loud laughter. In this case the loud laugh bespeaks, not the vacant mind, but a highly intelligent appreciation of a subtle humor.

The mock gravity and the ministerial intonation with which the little couplet in the next paragraph can be rendered is delightful. The pineapple part, of course, should be read in such a way as to bring out the contrast. The connection between the plum-cake incident and the rest of the essay can also be brought out with the voice. There is a difficult piece of reading in the paragraph beginning, "I remember an hypothesis"; but if it is read with pausing, the pupils have no difficulty in understanding the thought.

Having thus had a good time with the class, some teachers would insist on going no farther, on the ground that appreciation, which is the end and aim of literary study, has been reached. However, I feel that this essay can be taught as composition as well as literature, thus serving the two aims of the English course. My classes study the technique of the humor to determine just how Lamb was able to do what he did. We search for the sources of the humor. And before the class period is over, we have made an outline on the board that looks something like the following:

SOURCES OF HUMOR IN "THE DISSERTATION UPON ROAST PIG"

I. Burlesque

A. Unusual words dignifying the commonplace

1. A sorry antediluvian makeshift
2. Adhesive oleaginous
3. Cream and quintessence

4. Animal manna
 5. Ambrosian result
 6. Extradomiciliate
 7. Intenerating and dulcifying
- B. Latin phases
1. Mundus edibilis
 2. Princeps obsoniorum
 3. Amor immunditiae
 4. Praeludium
 5. Per flagellationem extremam
- C. Expressions indicating mock gravity
1. With no original speck of the amor immunditiae
 2. Behold him while he is doing . . . it seemeth rather a refreshing warmth, etc.
 3. How equably he twirleth round the string!
 4. He hath wept out his pretty eyes—radiant jellies—shooting stars
 5. See him in the dish, his second cradle, how meek he lieth!
 6. Wouldst thou have had this innocent grow up to the grossness and indocility which too often accompany maturer swinehood?
 7. From these sins he is happily snatched away—
 Ere sin could blight or sorrow fade
 Death came with timely care . . .
 8. He hath a fair sepulchre in the grateful stomach of the judicious epicure
 9. Barbecue your whole hogs to your palate, steep them in shalots, stuff them out with plantations of the rank and guilty garlic; you cannot poison them, or make them stronger than they are—but consider, he is a weakling, a flower
- II. Unusual figures of speech
- A. Broiling, the elder brother of roasting
 - B. It looks like refining a violet
 - C. His pretty eyes—radiant jellies—shooting stars
 - D. The dish, his second cradle
 - E. A fair sepulchre in the grateful stomach of the judicious epicure
 - F. He is a weakling—a flower
- III. Anachronism
- A. The insurance offices one and all shut up shop
 - B. Trial by jury
 - C. Cook's holiday
- IV. Exaggeration
- A. It was feared that the very science of architecture would in no long time be lost to the world

V. An abundance of parenthetical expressions

- A. The very teeth are invited to their share of the pleasures at this banquet in overcoming the coy, brittle resistance with adhesive oleaginous—O call it not fat—but an indefinable sweetness growing up to it—the tender blossoming of fat—fat cropped in the bud—taken in the shoot—in the first innocence—the cream and quintessence of the child pig's yet pure food—the lean, no lean, but a kind of animal manna—or, rather, fat and lean [if it must be so] so blended and running into each other, that both together make but one ambrosian result, or common substance

VI. His breaking off the thread of a thought

- A. To see the extreme sensibility of that tender age, he hath wept out his pretty eyes—radiant jellies—shooting stars
- B. It might impart a gusto . . .

The making of this outline is a lively scene of many hand-wavings, interruptions, and suggestions, everyone in the class being anxious to make a contribution. Now the time is ripe for just one thing—expression. So far the work has been largely impression—taking in—first, the appreciation of the humor, and then, the main points of the outline. Now is the time to suggest that original dissertations be written by any who feel inclined to do so, using the same sources of humor in imitation of Lamb's style. It is not well to make it a general assignment, for humor comes best spontaneously. Extra credit may well be offered as an inducement to as many as wish to attempt such a thing. If topics are suggested with some hints as to their treatment, there will be a few very good compositions handed in. Below is the work of a Sophomore in high school, exactly as he handed it in:

A RUMINATION ON CHEWING GUM

The development of chewing gum is very interesting. It was first discovered in the year 4091 B.C., says the Greek historian, Hispecticles to whom I am indebted for the following account.

A cave man named Boo-hoo was entertaining a neighbor one hot day in June, when his visitor suggested, "Er, my throat is very hot and dry. After five whole minutes of work I've finished writing my name on the great stone. Perhaps—"

Boo-hoo hastily interrupted him, "I'm very sorry, but I used my last bottle last week when we went on the Sunday School Picnic."

His little son, Gass, who had been listening attentively to everything that was said, spoke up, "Oh, father, aren't you forgetting that quart up in the

medicine closet? I saw it this morning when I put the peroxide on my finger that I cut on my new Bowie-knife."

"Why, er—I had quite forgotten it. I'll go get it right now," replied the embarrassed host, looking so angry that Gass hastily retired, wondering why his father had looked at him in just that way.

He found out just as soon as the visitor had gone. His father took him by the collar, saying, "Don't you know enough not to speak unless you are spoken to? I had to give up that whole quart. I am going to tie this stick in your mouth to teach you not to talk so much."

He pulled a stick from his pocket and tied it firmly in poor Gass's mouth. [It was a stick in two senses, being a piece of the viscid spruce.]

When Boo-hoo removed the stick from his son's mouth about an hour later, he noticed that Gass picked it up and returned it to his mouth, crushing it to a pulp with his teeth. When Boo-hoo asked for his reason he did not answer [his teeth were too busy chewing], but picked up another piece of spruce and placed it in Boo-hoo's mouth, wide open with astonishment, motioning him to chew on it.

Boo-hoo did so, thus experiencing for the first time the joys of chewing gum.

[Here the worthy Hispecticles goes into a long narrative, telling how this wonderful discovery spread, but it is sufficient to say that it did spread throughout all the surrounding country. Finally some unknown genius conceived the idea of extracting the gum from the spruce before subjecting it to the molar forces, thus eliminating the tasteless wood. From that it was but a short step to the modern chewing gum.]

I have chosen this story of the discovery of chewing gum because the "stick" of the story survives in the modern "stick of gum."

That is the history of chewing gum. Looking back over the long intervening years, who could have thought that such a delicious substance, such as, oh, words fail me, nothing can describe such a delectable masticatory as chewing gum, nay call it not chewing gum, call it rather deliciousness itself, *princeps ciborum delicatarum*, could have been born in a punishment!

It promotes better speech. Every one knows that when one can speak clearly with something in his mouth, he can elocute sans faute, without anything in his mouth. Poor Demosthenes, the famous Greek orator, had to put stones, cold, hard, stones in his mouth to cure his stammering for lack of chewing gum.

It steadies the nerves. Athletes all chew it. The first submarine failed to blow up its opponent because the captain, navigator, and crew did not have his plug of tobacco. Tobacco would not have made much difference, but who can imagine what would have happened if he had had a pack of chewing gum? It is absolutely necessary to students in an examination or when reports come out.